

Review

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Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, *Silvestre Revueltas: Sounds of a Political Passion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), ISBN 978-0-199-75148-8 (Hb).

Mexican musicologist Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus has published the first extensive study in English of the works of Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas (1899–1940). The comprehensive monograph – nearly 700 pages long – is the culmination of several decades of research into the life, work, and ideas of one of the most original composers of the early twentieth century. Building on his previous work on the composer,¹ Kolb-Neuhaus writes this book to challenge the conventional understanding of Revueltas’s music as merely a facet of nationalistic and exoticist interwar modernism, which is often viewed as having little or no connection to the composer’s leftist ideology. He contends that Revueltas’s music cannot be fully understood without considering the composer’s somewhat romantic affiliation with the ideals of the Communist International, particularly the pursuit of proletarian revolution.

The study is grounded in the musical analysis of Revueltas’s principal works and the examination of a substantial corpus of textual sources (including many unpublished letters) that were previously inaccessible to scholars. These texts, which Kolb-Neuhaus quotes extensively, are keys to understanding the political motivations underlying Revueltas’s music, discourses, and creative decisions. The reader will not find a detailed exploration of the connections between the composer’s music and his peculiar biography, or a comprehensive analysis of his compositional techniques and styles; as the title suggests, the monograph concentrates on the links between the composer’s music and his ‘political passion’ – specifically, how his affinity for leftist ideologies and admiration for the Mexican and Russian revolutions significantly influenced his musical thinking and compositional approach.

1 Some of his most significant studies on Revueltas include Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, *Silvestre Revueltas, catálogo de sus obras* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998); Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus and José Wolffer, eds., *Silvestre Revueltas: Sonidos en Rebelión* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2007); Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, ‘Silvestre Revueltas ‘Redes’: Composing for Film or Filming for Music?’, *Journal of Film Music* 2/4 (2009), 127–44; Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, *Contracanto: Una perspectiva semiótica de la obra temprana de Silvestre Revueltas* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012); Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, ‘Silvestre Revueltas’s Colorines vis-à-vis US Musical Modernisms: A Dialogue of the Deaf?’, *Latin American Music Review* 36/2 (2015), 194–230; Roberto Kolb-Neuhaus, ‘The Rending Call of the Poor and Forsaken Street Crier’: The Political and Expressive Dimension of a Topic in Silvestre Revueltas’ Early Works’, in *Studies for a Global History of Music*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Oxford: Ashgate, 2016), 395–423.

The book consists of sixteen chapters organized into five parts. After examining the connections between Revueltas's sociopolitical biography and his 'political sounding' in the first two chapters, the author dedicates the bulk of the book (chapters 3 to 14) to analysing the political dimension of the composer's key works and the sociopolitical context in which they were created. The book concludes with two chapters that examine the reception processes and the historiographical agenda that shaped and perpetuated the image of Revueltas as a nationalist composer. The chapters are designed as independent studies and do not always follow a chronological order, allowing for a non-linear reading of the monograph. A corpus of digital materials from Revueltas's personal archive is accessible online via a web address provided by Oxford University Press.

The author contends that, contrary to the claims of many music scholars over the decades, Revueltas cannot be regarded as representative of the interwar trend of exoticist musical 'Mexicanity', at least not uncritically and without acknowledging the composer's repeated rejection of nationalism. Kolb-Neuhaus argues that Revueltas critiqued the nationalism institutionalized by the post-revolutionary Mexican regime not only in his texts and discourses but also through the various satirical elements that permeate his music. The recourse to irony was one of Revueltas's primary strategies for distancing himself from the colonial thinking inherent in Eurocentric modernity. An example of this satirical treatment of popular tunes is found in the symphonic poem *Janitzio* (1933/36), one of Revueltas's works traditionally regarded as prototypically nationalist. The satirical approach to popular musical materials in this piece, which has puzzled many scholars, should be understood as a strategy to undermine paternalistic nationalist positions that sought to elevate the culture of the people to the realm of modernist art. Kolb-Neuhaus suggests that, unlike that of other composers around him (e.g. Carlos Chavez), Revueltas's music gave voice to the Mexican people, not in essentialist, folkloric terms, but in terms of their belonging to the working class. This perspective is also evident in many of Revueltas's writings, where he expressed his aversion to the 'intelligentsia' that arrogated to itself the right to speak on behalf of 'los de abajo' ('those down below') as a subaltern Other.

Revueltas's rejection of paternalistic nationalism is closely related to his detachment from the guiding values of Eurocentric modernism. As Kolb-Neuhaus explains, Revueltas repeatedly expressed his disapproval of pre- and post-Revolutionary Eurocentrism, that is, the idea of Europe (or rather, Central Europe) as the centre, and Mexico as the periphery. This notion was prevalent among many composers and performers in Revueltas's circle, particularly within the Conservatorio Nacional de Música de México. The author elucidates how Revueltas rejected the values of nationalist and Eurocentric modernism to avoid the exoticist appropriation of Mexican popular culture from a condescending position of hierarchical superiority. Montage, collage, and block-composing were among Revueltas's primary compositional strategies used to challenge Western classical music traditions based on development and teleological linearity. Kolb-Neuhaus interprets Revueltas's application of these techniques in most of his works as a form of 'rebellion' against 'hierarchies dependent on single or principal agencies that traditionally rule aesthetic development in Western art music' (9). Consequently, he advocates abandoning the traditional interpretation of Revueltas's music as

solely the product of European modernist influence, arguing that the concept of influence itself stems from a framework that subordinates all artistic expression originating from so-called ‘periphery’.

However, Revueltas’s music did not develop in isolation from its international aesthetic context but in close relation to the Western anti-Romantic modernist tendencies of the interwar period. The influence of Igor Stravinsky, in particular, is manifest in many compositions, such as *Colorines* (1932) or *Planos* (1930). These relationships of influence could have been explored in greater detail from a political perspective in the book. How should we interpret Revueltas’s anti-modernist stance in relation to the clear influence that a number of European composers, in particular Stravinsky, exerted in his music? How do the ironic elements that pervade much of Revueltas’s work relate to the anti-Romantic modernist currents of the interwar period, which – as Richard Taruskin and many others have shown² – were primarily characterized by an emphasis on irony, satire, and the grotesque?

With respect to the influence of modernism, one of the innovative contributions of the book is its discussion of the impact that the multidisciplinary Mexican avant-garde artistic movement of the 1920s, known as *estridentismo* (particularly in its poetic aspect), had on Revueltas’s aesthetics. A defining characteristic of *estridentista* literary and artistic works was their incorporation of an explicit Bolshevik perspective, a trait that distinguished them from many, though not all, of the European historical avant-garde of the period. A paradigmatic example is the poem *Super-poema bolchevique en 5 cantos* (1924) by stridentist leader Manuel Maples Arce Urbe. Kolb-Neuhaus demonstrates how Revueltas’s interest in literary stridentism inspired him to compose a fascinating piece: the didactic children’s ballet *Troka* in 1933, which the composer described as a ‘pantomima infantil bailable’ (‘danceable children’s pantomime’). The work is based on a collection of Soviet-inspired didactic short stories for children created by ex-stridentist writer Germán Liz Arzubide. The pantomime’s main character is a massive, communist, anti-imperialist robot named Troka, who symbolizes the future of Mexican youth. Particularly noteworthy is Kolb-Neuhaus’s discussion of the connections between literary stridentism and the ballet score, which he characterizes as a ‘socialist avant-gardist work akin to Soviet constructivism’ (211).

While *Troka* is one of Revueltas’s works with a relatively clear political message, other compositions convey political content or ideology in more subtle and indirect ways. A significant portion of the book is devoted to explaining the various methods Revueltas used to express political thought or ideals through his music. As Kolb-Neuhaus notes, in the early stages of his career, Revueltas conveyed political notions in a traditional manner, utilizing lyrics or other types of texts (e.g., in his settings of three poems by Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén). As his career progressed, the composer gradually shifted towards expressing political ideas through musical symbolism, resulting in some of his most renowned works, including *Redes* (1936), *Itinerarios* (1938), or the well-known *Sensemaya* (1937/38). His reputation as

2 See the chapters ‘Pathos is Banned’ and ‘Lost—or Rejected—Illusions’ in Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 447–560; see also Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (London: Routledge, 2000).

a political composer significantly increased after he joined the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, or LEAR) and was elected president of its executive committee in May 1936. Even within the context of an overt militancy in a movement such as the LEAR, Revueltas was reluctant to participate in institutional propaganda. This appears to be the reason why, unlike Eisler and many other communist composers in his circle, Revueltas wrote very few propaganda songs for the masses, and when he did so it, for instance *Mexico en España* (1937), it was mostly in response to commissions and political pressures. None of these songs possess the memorable qualities of Eisler's more popular *Kampflieder* (battle songs), such as the *Kominternlied* (Comintern Song, 1929) or the *Solidaritätslied* (Solidarity Song, 1931).³

In the book's final section, Kolb-Neuhaus explores the emotional impact of the Spanish Civil War and the 1936 assassination of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca on Revueltas. He illustrates how the composer's visit to wartime Spain, as part of the delegation sent by the Cárdenas regime to support cultural activities, became one of the most pivotal political experiences of his life. This experience inspired some of his finest compositions, including *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca* (1936) and *Itinerarios*. Many of the works composed during this final period of his life reflect his disillusionment with the rise of Fascism.

Throughout the book, Kolb-Neuhaus explores a dilemma that permeated Revueltas's career, particularly during the later decades of his life. Like Eisler and other communist modernist composers of the time, Revueltas found himself torn between his communist ideology and his role as an art-music composer, a position that risked alienating him from the common people. The tensions between elitism and social conscience, as well as between artistic individuality and socialist ideals, significantly influenced Revueltas's thought and work. However, can we genuinely classify Revueltas's music as proletarian music? Kolb-Neuhaus argues that Revueltas did not compose music specifically for workers, and most of the concerts he conducted were not directed at them. Nevertheless, the composer sought to align himself with the voice of workers and peasants through his music 'to share it with his politically empathetic peers in the audience, but at the same time also to disturb and confuse those incapable or unwilling to empathize with said people's feelings, emotions, and causes. This was surely the reason his music satirizes "cultured appropriations of Mexican folklore," such as that mostly expected by his concertgoing audience' (87).

In conclusion, *Silvestre Revueltas: Sounds of a Political Passion* provides a re-examination of the composer's music from a distinctly decolonial perspective, prioritizing his ideology and the sociopolitical context over biographical or stylistic considerations. In this comprehensive monograph, Kolb-Neuhaus demonstrates his profound knowledge of the composer's creative and theoretical output, solidifying his position as one of the leading international scholars on Revueltas. The thought-provoking study is essential for understanding the various issues that contributed to the remarkable originality of Revueltas's music, as well as the contradictory

3 Kolb-Neuhaus has also discussed Revueltas's battle songs in 'Silvestre Revueltas y el panfleto: una relación difícil', *Discanto* 1 (2005), 187–204 and 'Hanns Eisler, Silvestre Revueltas und die mexikanische Kampfliedkultur' in *Hanns Eisler—Ein Komponist ohne Heimat*, ed. Hartmut Krones (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2012), 133–50.

tensions that defined art music in post-revolutionary Mexico. The book will thus be beneficial not only to students of music history but also to researchers in the fields of cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and political science who seek to explore the intersections between interwar music and communist ideology, anti-fascism, propaganda, political ritual, and imperialism.

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